

Sick 9/11 Responders Join U.S. Reps & Labor Leaders in Urging President to Finally Make 9/11 Health a Priority

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WASHINGTON, DC — 9/11 responders who were made sick by the toxic air at Ground Zero traveled to Washington today to watch the President's State of the Union Address from the House Gallery and join federal lawmakers and labor leaders in urging President Bush to include sufficient funding for unmet 9/11 health needs in the Administration's Fiscal Year 2009 budget proposal. The lawmakers, labor leaders, and sick responders also demanded answers from the Administration about why the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) suddenly decided last month to halt its plans for organizing an important health monitoring and treatment program for Ground Zero workers around the country, and advocated for passage of a comprehensive long-term program to help everyone exposed to 9/11 toxins.

"The 9/11 heroes in the Gallery tonight will represent the thousands of responders, residents and workers who were made sick by the toxic air at Ground Zero and have been desperately looking to their government and their President for help," said Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney (D-NY). "Let's hope the President finally gets it right in his last State of the Union address and tells the heroes of 9/11 that he wants to do right by them before he leaves office. It's not too late to finally prioritize the health needs of those who risked life and limb to help their fellow citizens in the aftermath of 9/11, and are now suffering from serious — sometimes fatal — illnesses as a result of their heroism."

"I am outraged that the Bush Administration continues to turn its back on the heroes of 9/11," said Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY). "We need to provide medical care for the thousands of brave Americans who came to Ground Zero to help in the recovery efforts after the collapse of the World Trade Center. These failures of the White House are just the latest examples of the federal government's continued malfeasance since 9/11. I urge the President, when delivering his state of the union tonight, to look these brave 9/11 workers in the eye and explain why he will not provide for those who gave so selflessly at Ground Zero."

"We have made progress over the last year to begin getting the resources necessary to help our 9/11 heroes," said Rep. Vito Fossella (R-NY). "However, we now need a significant investment by the federal government into health monitoring and treatment for those who are sick or injured. In addition, the federal government must develop a comprehensive plan to address the health impacts of 9/11. We continue urging the White House to provide adequate funding in the 2009 budget to help all those who are sick or injured as a result of the terror attacks."

The Administration has failed to include adequate 9/11 health funding in any of its post-9/11 budget proposals. As a result, Congress had to fight time and again for federal funding to help sick responders, residents, and workers. Additionally, weeks before Christmas, HHS suddenly announced that it had abandoned plans to create the first federally-funded national program to provide treatment for sick 9/11 responders who reside outside the New York metropolitan area. Currently, no such national treatment program exists.

"Year-after-year President Bush has refused to request the necessary funding to provide medical care for the 9-11 workers," said AFL-CIO President John Sweeney. "Today we are here to call upon our government to help those who came forward and helped the nation during one of its darkest hours."

"These first responders are suffering, and it's a disgrace that Congress must fight with the Administration to secure the health care and other support they need," Rep. Tim Bishop (D-NY) said. "I am bringing John Feal to Washington because this nation needs to stand up for the heroes like him who stood with us and risked their lives when America was attacked. Just as we shouldn't only care about veterans on Veterans Day, we shouldn't only pay attention to the needs of these first responders on the anniversary of 9/11."

“Too many first responders like me are now sick and dying because of their work at Ground Zero,” said FDNY Deputy Chief Jim Riches, who lost his firefighter son Jimmy on 9/11, and participated in the search and recovery effort at Ground Zero. “Unfortunately, I don’t think we’ve yet to see the full impact that 9/11-related illnesses have had on all of the first responders and residents. I speak from personal experience - we desperately need fully-funded medical care for all those exposed to the toxic air at Ground Zero.”

“Our September 11th first responders will be remembered as heroes today, tomorrow and every day for the rest of their lives. It’s time the Bush administration treated them as such. Pulling the plug on a national health program for these selfless individuals is just plain wrong, and something must be done about it. The Bush administration needs to include sufficient 9/11 health funding in its 2009 budget proposal to ensure the long term health and well-being of our heroes,” said Denis Hughes, President of the New York State AFL-CIO.

Maloney, Nadler, Fossella, and Bishop joined Reps. Maurice Hinchey (D-NY), Steve Rothman (D-NJ), Neil Abercrombie (D-HI), Robert Brady (D-PA), Collin Peterson (D-MN), Alcee Hastings (D-FL) and Donna Christensen (D-VI) in giving the sick responders their Gallery passes for tonight’s State of the Union address.

In addition to Deputy Chief Riches, the responders attending tonight’s address include: Marvin Bethea, Marty Fullam, Alex Sanchez, Norman Ferguson, Eddie Boles, Manuel Checo, John Feal, Joseph Libretti, and Freddy Cordero. Joseph Zadroga, the father of deceased New York City detective and 9/11 responder James Zadroga, also attended.

Additional Background:

A July report by the independent Government Accountability Office (GAO) stated that many World Trade Center first responders don’t have access to the thorough, uninterrupted health screening and monitoring services they need, and efforts to provide health screening and monitoring services to World Trade Center responders living outside of the New York City area are incomplete and intermittent. The GAO recommended that the Secretary of HHS expeditiously ensure that screening and monitoring services are available for responders residing outside the NYC area.

In September, Maloney, Nadler, and Fossella introduced H.R. 3543, the “9/11 Health and Compensation Act” to ensure that everyone exposed to the Ground Zero toxins has a right to be medically monitored and all who are sick as a result have a right to treatment.

9/11 responders have sat in the balcony for the State of the Union as the guests of Rep. Maloney and other Members of Congress in 2003, 2005, 2006, and 2007.

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